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PORTRAIT OF A MAN

BY

LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER

LUCAS CRANACH the elder has not hitherto been represented in our Museum; with the acquisition of the Portrait of a Man one aspect of his art will be seen to advantage. Although Cranach was born in 1472, no certain works by him exist of an earlier date than 1503. In 1505 he was court painter to the Electors of Saxony, Frederick the Wise and John the Constant, and the rest of his life, passed mostly at Wittenberg, is intimately connected with the fortunes of this house. But, although he certainly executed portraits at an earlier date, most of the works of the first two decades of the sixteenth century consist of religious pieces, mythologies and allegories in which he displayed his curious naïve and odd perversity. After 1520 his portraits became more numerous and by far the most important part of his output. With increasing years Cranach lost something of the gaiety and charm of his earlier inventions, so that the fantasias of this later period, even when they are by him, and not the product of his crowded atelier, are often labored and lacking in inspiration. On the contrary the portraits of this time become increasingly serious and impressive in their unhesitating directness of characterization.

It is disappointing that so far no clue has been found to the sitter for this remarkable portrait. In general design it agrees very nearly with the portrait of Cranach's friend and protector, Johann Frederick der Grossmuthige in the Louvre. Like this, that picture has the same crowded composition, the cap being partly cut by the top of the picture and the folded hands crowded into the bottom corner. The portrait is signed and dated 1531. Our portrait, which is stronger in drawing, must belong to about the same period of the artist's career; the face indeed is so similar that at first sight it

might be supposed to be another portrait of the same Prince, but a careful comparison with the medals in which he is represented makes it clear that this is not so.

In technique our portrait is remarkable for the extraordinary perfection of its lacquer-like surface. It is an instance of the strong personal bent of Cranach's genius that at a time when Titian was engaged at Charles the Fifth's Court, and was there employing in portraiture the full possibilities of chiaroscuro and broken color, Cranach should thus deliberately adhere to earlier convention, or rather, deliberately elaborate the technique of painting along opposite lines. For the treatment of the red lead background and the black dress in this painting remind one more of early Japanese painting or Persian miniatures than of anything in contemporary European art. None of the great German artists of this time, not even Dürer himself, ever understood clearly the pictorial as opposed to the draughtsman's vision of nature, and one may praise Cranach in that here there is no compromise between the two ideals, and the quality and beauty of the paint have been wrought to the highest perfection of surface, but are as expression entirely subordinate to the linear design.

As a portrait-painter Cranach was not perhaps profoundly psychological, but he rendered the external characteristics of his sitters with masterly assurance. Doctor Woermann in his article* on the Cranach Exhibition of 1899 at Dresden, says: "It would be too much to say that Cranach's best portraits are on a level with the best of Dürer and Holbein. But the interval is not wide that divided them from the works of these masters."

The portrait now in the Museum lacks both date and Cranach's usual signature of a crowned serpent with bat's wings. It comes from the collection of Count Wilczek, but no previous history of it has yet been traced.

R. E. F.

* *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst*. Vol. XI.



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